



Middle East

THE 'PEACEFUL' MOVEMENT TO DESTROY ISRAEL

Setting the record straight on BDS and the call for two states

By **Yosef Kuperwasser**
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The immediate result of Israel's recent election was a victory for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a close ally of American President Donald Trump. But the election results have also revived the perennial interest outside the country in the political lives of Israelis and Palestinians. Paradoxically, while formal relations between the governments of Israel and the U.S. appear to be at a high, anti-Israel political movements have also been getting stronger as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has inched closer to normalization in American progressive and to some extent liberal politics.

The growth of the BDS movement in America presents a serious challenge. It means that even as the U.S. alliance with Israel may grow stronger on some fronts it will always remain vulnerable to changes in political administration and sudden setbacks and it has a negative impact on the relations between Israel and left-leaning Jewish Americans. It is imperative, therefore to confront the false premises on which the BDS case has been constructed and expose the great distance between the polite myths repeated by BDS supporters and the violent realities inherent in a political cause that holds as its ultimate goal the destruction of Israel.

Setting the record straight on the issue of the ‘two-state solution’

One place to begin examining the misconceptions surrounding BDS is with a long article written in *The Guardian* last August by the American journalist Nathan Thrall, which purported to explain the historical roots and current aims of the movement. In fact, Thrall’s thousands of words on the subject highlighted the fallacies animating the beliefs of progressive Americans on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Thrall mentions “two-states” 15 times in his *Guardian* article, but not even once does he mention “two-states for two-peoples,” which indicates his deep misunderstanding of the issue. Indeed, the Palestinian leadership is ready to have a “two-state solution” as long as it is not a “two-states for two-peoples, with a mutual recognition of their national identity” solution. The Palestinian narrative thus negates the existence of a Jewish people and of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine throughout history, and treats Zionism as a racist, colonialist movement created by the Europeans to promote Western interests. It therefore rejects the idea of a state for the Jewish people on any grain of soil in Palestine.

This is the core of the conflict and has been so since this narrative was formed after the Balfour Declaration in 1917, since, before 1900, namely before the emergence of Zionism, the Arab residents of this piece of land did not consider themselves Palestinians.

The two-state solution supported by the Palestinians speaks about a Palestinian state in the pre-1967 territories and a nonethnic state called Israel that is not the nation-state of the Jewish people (which does not exist, since, in their narrative, Judaism refers only to a religion and not to a people with their own nation).

This is the implementation of the “phases theory” adopted by the PLO in 1974, namely that Palestinians should take from the Israelis whatever they can and then form a state that will keep struggling for the rest of British-mandate Palestine. Article 8 of this Ten Point Program stated that, “Once it is established, the Palestinian national authority will strive to achieve a union of the confrontation countries, with the aim of completing the liberation of all Palestinian territory, and as a step along the road to comprehensive Arab unity.” This is why the recognition of the Palestinian refugees’ “right of return” is more important than the return itself; it is considered a tool to bring about the demise of Israel as a Jewish state.

Mahmoud Abbas’ speeches earlier in 2018, which Thrall mentions briefly, repeated this narrative and reaffirm his commitment to the ideas in his book *Zionism, From Beginning to End*, written in 1977 and never translated, which provides his full logic and recommended way of action for putting an end to the injustice represented by Zionism. Abbas may use occasionally the expression “two-states for two-peoples,” but the second “people” he refers to are actually the *Israelis* rather than the Jewish people; another way of denying the historical basis for Jewish nationhood within the borders of Israel.

Setting the record straight on the Oslo Accords and the Palestinian state

Thrall writes as if the Oslo Accords guaranteed the creation of a Palestinian state. In fact, there is nothing further from the truth. Oslo makes absolutely no reference to a Palestinian state, but rather speaks about an undetermined permanent settlement, to be negotiated. Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's prime minister at the time, made it clear in his last appearance before the Knesset, on Oct. 5, 1995, that he opposed the idea of a Palestinian state.

We view the permanent solution in the framework of a State of Israel which will include most of the area of the Land of Israel (Palestine) as it was under the rule of the British Mandate, and alongside it a Palestinian entity which will be a home to most of the Palestinian residents living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. We would like this entity to be less than a state, and which will independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its authority.

Setting the record straight on the BDS stance toward violence

No less than 13 times, Thrall attributes nonviolence as a principle of the BDS movement. This is misleading.

First, unlike Gandhi and Mandela, who were morally and practically against the use of violence, BDS is not at all against violence. It rather views it as not efficient enough and unsuccessful in bringing about the demise of Israel. Therefore, BDS suggests nonviolence as an additional, more effective method. So, whereas Gandhi rejected violence and Mandela thought that violence is justified only when nonviolent activity is proven futile, BDS' resort to less-violent activities is a result of the shortcomings of violence in the forms of war or terror. It complements the violent methods of the struggle and is not really nonviolent. It simply uses soft violence (hurting the enemy without using force). The option of peacemaking is definitely not what they try to promote as a group.

Secondly, among the groups that constitute the BNC (the Palestinian BDS National Committee), many of them are **branches of terrorist organizations**, especially PFLP, the Marxist Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine. One of the BNC founders is the "Palestinian National and Islamic Forces," which Thrall describes as "the coordinating body for every significant political party." In fact, the "Palestinian National and Islamic Forces" functioned as the joint command of the ruthless terror campaign known as the Second Intifada and among its members are the terror organizations Hamas, Islamic Jihad, PFLP, and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. This whitewashing tells volumes about how far Thrall and many progressives are willing to go to justify their narrative of BDS as a beacon of principled nonviolence.

It is quite surprising that Thrall was so easily misled on this matter given that BDS activists themselves have made no secret of their support for violence. Chants of "Intifada, Intifada, long live the Intifada" have been chronicled on multiple occasions by both **anti-Israel** and **pro-Israel** groups. Pro-BDS websites are quite often used to glorify terrorists and encourage violence. One has to be willfully blind to compare such a movement, as Thrall does, to the nonviolent campaigns led by Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

Setting the record straight regarding the goals of BDS

When it comes to describing the three declared goals of the movement, Thrall offers a sanitized and sympathetic account.

What was new about BDS was that it took disparate campaigns to pressure Israel and united them around three clear demands, with one for each major component of the Palestinian people. First, freedom for the residents of the occupied territories; second, equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel; and third, justice for Palestinian refugees in the diaspora—the largest group—including the right to return to their homes.

But here is the way the BDS actually phrases its demands from Israel:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall.
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

It looks somewhat similar, but misses the main point. The aim of these demands is the total annihilation of Israel as a nation-state of the Jewish people. The occupation that they refer to is not the 1967 occupation, but rather the formation of Israel in the first place. On the matter of full equal rights for Arab-Palestinians living in Israel, some may point out that despite the large degree of political franchise and freedom exercised by Palestinian citizens of Israel, they are still underprivileged relative to the average Israeli. What is crucial to understand, however, is that the BDS framework of rights is not confined to individual civil and political freedoms but, rather, includes a claim to collective Palestinian national rights that would prevent Israel from being the nation-state of the Jewish people. This view was promulgated in the basic documents prepared by Israeli-Arabs in 1996-2000. The reference to Resolution 194 means recognizing the Palestinian refugees' "right of return" to their homes (though the language of the resolution is not that clear on the matter) despite the fact that no such right exists in international law and its implementation in practice would mean the end of Israel as a democratic Jewish nation-state.

Thrall might have gained a better appreciation for BDS goals simply by listening to the movement's supporters.

Ahmad Moor, a prominent BDS activist, **admitted**: "OK, fine. So BDS does mean the end of the Jewish state ... BDS is not another step on the way to the final showdown; BDS is The Final Showdown."

As'ad Abu Khalil, a University of California professor and a BDS activist has also been quite clear. "The real aim of BDS is to bring down the State of Israel," he said.

Thrall's accommodating approach is exactly the response that BDS counts on from Western and Israeli "useful idiots," who are all too happy to ignore inconvenient realities and accept the deceptive talking points that are spoon-fed to them.

Supporters of the BDS movement may believe that they are engaged in a legitimate form of protest. They may be motivated by their perception of abuses committed by the IDF, by a desire to end Israel's settlement policy, or to redress the policies of the Israeli state that they believe to be unjust—but that is

not, in fact, the goal of the movement in which they have enlisted. The goal of BDS is not to change the policies of Israel's government, or force it to reform. Rather, its purpose is precisely what BDS activist Ahmad Moor stated: to single out the Jewish state, alone among the nations of the earth, as the one country in the world that must be destroyed. Anyone who calls themselves pro-BDS, however noble they may believe their own intentions are, ought, at a minimum, acknowledge that this is the true end toward which they are working.

Setting the record straight on the relationship between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism

Thrall, like many supporters of BDS, tries to justify the BDS argument that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism. This contradicts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism, accepted by the European Union and the U.S. State department, which states that delegitimization, demonization, and the use of double standards towards Israel are modern day forms of anti-Semitism. Thrall claims that the purpose of the new definition was to punish criticism of Israel by equating it with hatred of Jews. Yet, the definition clearly states that criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitism, which suggests that anyone making this claim to discredit the definition is either actively mendacious or totally detached from reality.

Israel has no problem with criticism. What it rejects is: delegitimization, demonization, and being treated with double standards. These are features of modern anti-Semitism. Thrall disregards the deep analysis and logic that stand behind this notion and gives unabatted credibility to the arguments of those opposing it, though they are very weak.

Thrall ignores the wealth of literature exploring the anti-Semitic motives embedded into the Palestinian narrative (**including my own work on the subject**). Instead, he gives credibility to ideologically driven so-called "human rights" organizations and lists reasons why the reference to three Ds (delegitimization, demonization, and double standards) is unjustified. This is exactly the position of Jeremy Corbyn and some radical members of the British Labour Party who are proud to cooperate with Hamas and organizations such as the British-based Palestinian Return Centre, that are part and parcel of the "delegitimization" and BDS efforts. It was at a Palestinian Return Centre event that Corbyn made one of his anti-Semitic remarks about British Jews who fail to get British Irony.

Thrall tries to justify double standards against Israel by noting that double standards were used in other cases. This is indeed a strange argument to legitimize the effort to delegitimize the existence of a U.N. member. Amazingly, Thrall's article in *The Guardian* came after President Abbas delivered **a speech earlier in 2018** blaming the very character of the Jews as the cause for the Holocaust—only one of a number of anti-Semitic statements he made that year.

Setting the record straight on the libel of apartheid

Thrall mentions Apartheid 20 times and eventually endorses this libel. Here is how he describes the situation:

The more deeply entrenched this one-state reality became, the more resonant the charge of apartheid, and the more difficult to imagine undoing it through partition into two states. A battle against occupation

could be concluded with a simple military withdrawal, but a struggle against apartheid could be won only with the end of state policies that discriminated against non-Jews. In the case of Israel, these could be found not just in the occupied territories, but everywhere Palestinians came into contact with the state. In the West Bank, Palestinians were denied the right to vote for the government controlling their lives, deprived of free assembly and movement, forbidden from equal access to roads, resources and territory, and imprisoned indefinitely without charge. In Gaza, they could not exit, enter, import, export or even approach their borders without the permission of Israel or its ally, Egypt. In Jerusalem, they were segregated from one another and encircled by checkpoints and walls. In Israel, they were evicted from their lands, prevented from reclaiming their expropriated homes, and blocked from residing in communities inhabited exclusively by Jews. In the diaspora, they were prevented from reunifying with their families in Israel-Palestine or returning to their homes, solely because they were not Jews.

Since Thrall lives in Jerusalem and travels quite a lot around Israel and the territories one may wonder how he came to believe such fictions. Not all of his assertions are outright wrong. Some are detached from context—namely the terror threat Israel faces on a daily basis that forces Israel to take some measures to protect its citizens, including Arab Israelis.

Prominent black South Africans such as former **Defense Minister Mesoia Lakota**, himself a former victim of South Africa's apartheid policies, have publicly refuted and even denounced the comparison between apartheid South Africa and the democratic State of Israel. Black South African human rights and anti-apartheid activist **Leon Jamaine Mithi** has said that "calling Israel an apartheid state is an insult to black South Africans who suffered under the now defunct system of strict racial segregation. Mithi added that, "the Apartheid term has been appropriated to wrongly label Israel when referring to conflict with Palestine."

The facts speak for themselves. The semi-sovereign Palestinian Authority that controls the lives of the Palestinians in Areas A and B in the West Bank is the chosen representative of their national will and has its own large security force. All the Palestinians in the territories, including those who are residents of Jerusalem and Area C (administered by Israel) vote in the PA elections. The fact that elections for the Palestinian parliament were not held since 2006 is very unfortunate for the Palestinians, but it has nothing to do with Israel.

Furthermore, Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza have the right to gather and demonstrate and they exercise this right very often. The problem is that most of the time the demonstrations turn violent, and then there is a need to restore public order. The limitations on the movement of Palestinians in the West Bank are very limited (during the intifada there were checkpoints, but with the relative calm almost all of them were removed long ago). They drive on the same roads that Jews do, with a few exceptions that have to do with security needs (for example, Jews are not allowed to enter Areas A and B, which are controlled by the PA).

Thus, there are very few limitations on Palestinians and those that do exist have to do with security needs and have no racial motivation. Palestinians who want to cross from the areas that are subject to the Oslo Accords to sovereign Israel need a permit, and more than 100,000 workers do it every day.

Palestinians on the West Bank are not denied access to resources, but they refuse to cooperate in joint efforts to develop water systems. Almost all of them enjoy water and electricity provided mostly by Israel. There are also no West Bank Palestinians who are imprisoned indefinitely without charge. As sanctioned by the Fourth Geneva Convention Israel does use administrative detention in the event of a grave security

suspicion based on sensitive information, but such cases have to be brought before a court for approval. After that period the arrest can be prolonged but that can happen only if there is reason to believe that the suspect is still dangerous.

Palestinian citizens of Israel have the right to vote and to be elected to the Knesset just like the Jews and there were 14 Arab members and four Druze members in the Knesset before the last elections. Their votes in 1995 made it possible for Rabin to have a majority in the Knesset to approve the second Oslo Accord, in spite of the fact that most of the Jewish members of the Knesset voted against it. Israeli Arabs already hold influential positions in Israel as judges, Knesset members, medical doctors and pharmacists, and their integration in society is growing considerably.

They can live wherever they want with the exception of small communities with special demographic or religious character, but this is true also for different segments of Jewish society. Arab Israelis fill the public spaces in mostly Jewish populated cities and have fun just like anybody else. According to public opinion polls Israelis are among the happiest people on earth and that includes Israeli Arabs too.

Palestinians in Jerusalem are not segregated from one another and encircled by checkpoints and walls. They can live wherever they want and they can move to wherever they want since they are residents of Israel. The state offers them full citizenship, which they generally decline. True, some suburbs were left behind the security wall and that makes their lives much more complicated because they have to go through checkpoints on their way to other parts of the city. And it is true that some of the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem suffer from negligence. But this is not proof of apartheid and the government has allocated significant budgets to close the gaps.

As for the Gaza Strip, the main actor imposing limitations on movement there is Egypt, which controls the Rafah crossing and can administer it in an erratic manner. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 and has no obligation to let the people of Gaza enter Israel, though it does allow almost unlimited entry to Israel for medical treatment and other special purposes.

There is no limitation on exports and imports that is not directly related to security needs. Hundreds of loaded trucks deliver merchandise across the Kerem Shalom crossing every day, and the small crew there has to make sure that no military equipment crosses (attempts to smuggle such material are a frequent occurrence). Pursuant to the terms of the Oslo Accords, the ability to approach the fence is restricted for security purposes and the demonstrations of the March of Return in recent months testify to that need.

Setting the record straight on the Palestinian diaspora

Perhaps Thrall's most outrageous claim is regarding Palestinians in the diaspora who cannot unite with their families and return to their homes just because they are not Jews.

To set the record straight, these people left their houses in the context of the 1948-49 war launched by Arab parties who sought to annihilate Israel. In that context many decided to leave while others were forced out. As the intention to annihilate Israel still exists, denying them reentry is essential from a national security point of view. It has absolutely no racial connotation as those Arabs who remained in 1948 and enjoy equal civil and political rights.

In truth, many do not live in the diaspora but in territories governed by Palestinians themselves in Gaza and the PA-controlled areas, yet the international community (through UNRWA) still treats them as refugees. The Palestinian leadership, Arab states, and the U.N. insist on maintaining this refugee status rather than finding for them workable solutions in the places where they have resided for generations. Thereby, they “eternalize” the refugee status of those Palestinians even in their third and fourth generation and prolong their suffering, while deluding them into believing, through unceasing agitation and incitement, that they are going to return and wipe Israel off the map. It is precisely this destructive vision that is expressed by the ubiquitous chant: “from the river (Jordan) to the sea (the Mediterranean) Palestine will be free.” Thrall, of course, prefers to ignore this.

Setting the record straight on the security fence/wall

Thrall refers to the 2004 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice as a final ruling that held that the construction of the fence was illegal according to international law. However, as its name implies, this was nothing more than a nonbinding advisory *opinion* supported by most of the judges with the exception of the American judge, and some adverse comments by other judges. The fact that the U.N. General Assembly accepted it has no legal authority and is nothing more than another General Assembly recommendation adopted by an automatic anti-Israel majority.

However, what is much more relevant is the evident benefits provided by the fence to Israel’s security. A Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader in Damascus **admitted several years ago** that the fence makes it almost impossible for his organization to carry out terror attacks inside Israel from the West Bank. Before the construction of the fence, Israel was like a house with doors (the entry checkpoints) but without walls. The fence was a security necessity that saved many lives. Its path was a subject of discussions and corrections by the Israeli Supreme Court balancing humanitarian concerns with security considerations.

Thrall’s ranting covers other issues—Israel’s new “Jewish People Nation State” basic law, his claim that Israel has anti-democratic legislation, his apologetic attitude to the EU support of BDS-supporting organizations, his false claim that the PLO has accepted the international and Israeli demands for a two-state solution, his misleading and incorrect reference to the issue of unrecognized Arab villages in Israel, his irrelevant and misleading reference to the demographic issue (as if at any scenario the Arab Palestinians who live in Gaza or the areas controlled by the PA may become citizens of Israel), and his choice of interviewees and other issues for which space is too limited.

However, one final issue needs to be addressed. This is the question of whether progressive American Jews should support a boycott of Israel’s settlements. Thrall raises a list of pro and con arguments and though he remains officially undecided, he appears to favor this option.

The issue of settlements and Israel’s control of the territories since 1967 is controversial and there is a fierce and heated debate both in Israel and in the international arena over the matter. Israel respects the opinions of foreign entities even though they are not a party in the conflict. The EU for example spends considerable sums of money supporting fringe Israeli civil society organizations that represent the extreme left with minimal public support inside Israel in the hope that this will influence Israeli public opinion and change Israeli policy on the ground. This tolerance stands, of course, in sharp contrast with Thrall’s suggestion that Israeli policy prevents the country’s critics from expressing their views.

Yet calling for boycotts against the settlements goes beyond expressing an opinion. Its purpose is to harm, not only Israeli civilians within the settlements, but other Israelis and Palestinians who are involved in connected industries.

Moreover, one cannot ignore the context: Behind the boycott against the settlements looms the larger stated aim of BDS to usher the “final showdown” and wipe out the Jewish nation-state in Israel.

To sum up, Israel is interested in a secure and real peace and has no intention to rule over the Palestinians or disrespect them. On the contrary, we wish them prosperity. This transpired in an even clearer form than before from the election results. BDS on the other hand, has no interest in peace. It is against the existence of a state for the Jewish people and to promote this goal they support terror and adopt delegitimization, demonization, and double standards toward Israel. Liberals should be able to call this anti-Semitism and to oppose it, instead of providing it with legitimacy. This should not make them shy away from criticizing Israeli policies. They are welcome. We Israelis criticize vehemently our own policies. We call it democracy.

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Brigadier General (Reserve) Yosef Kuperwasser led the Research and Assessment Division of Israeli Military Intelligence. He is currently a Senior Project Director at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.



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MORE IN: ANTI-BDS BDS ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT TWO-STATE SOLUTION



| Eric Hobsbawm in London, 1999(Original photo: Peter Marlow/Magnum Photos)

When the historian Eric Hobsbawm died in 2012, at the age of 95, his family arranged for him to be buried in London's Highgate Cemetery near the grave of Karl Marx. It was an appropriate resting place for one of the 20th century's leading Marxist historians, whose work focused on the emergence of capitalism from feudalism and the rise of the modern working class. Hobsbawm made his reputation in the 1960s with books on the history of labor, including influential studies of how bandits, Luddites, and other "primitive rebels" articulated working-class resistance to power. He went on to win a broad readership with a series of broad-gauge histories—*The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Empire* and *The Age of Extremes*—that synthesized the political and economic history of the modern world from 1789 to 1991. By the turn of the century, Hobsbawm was possibly the best-known English-language historian in the world.

But many historians learned from Marx; fewer could say, like Hobsbawm, that they were actually communists, committed not just to studying the class struggle but to furthering it. And still fewer could claim to have remained communists till the end of their lives. Many intellectuals who joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, at a time when it seemed like the only bulwark against fascism, were eventually shocked out of their allegiance by one or another of the Soviet Union's crimes and betrayals. There were exoduses from the party in the late 1930s, following Stalin's purge and show trials; in 1939, after the USSR declared an alliance with Nazi Germany; in the late 1940s, after Stalin's takeover of Eastern Europe; and in 1956, when Russian tanks rolled into Budapest.

While the Soviet invasion of Hungary marked the end of Hobsbawm's active engagement with the Communist Party of Great Britain, he never actually quit it. Indeed, Hobsbawm's communism was

longer-lived than the CPGB itself, which dissolved in 1991 following the breakup of the Soviet Union. When asked why, late in his life, Hobsbawm replied that he would rather be a communist than an ex-communist: “I don’t like being in the company of the sort of people I’ve seen leaving the Communist Party and becoming anti-Communist. ... I don’t wish to be untrue to my past or to friends and comrades of mine.”

No one who knew him would have been surprised, then, to hear that Hobsbawm wanted to be buried close to Marx. What did surprise his friends, Richard Evans writes in his new biography *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, was that Hobsbawm had asked for the Kaddish to be recited at his funeral. When his fellow historian Ira Katznelson rose to say the prayer, he recalls in Evans’ book, “there as a kind of—you could see some intake of breath ... perhaps people were taken aback by the introduction of a Jewish prayer into a ceremony that Eric had intended to be resolutely secular.” What would a dialectical materialist want with the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead?

But of course, this kind of atavism—this turn toward Jewish tradition, at the end of a life estranged from Judaism—is itself a familiar 20th-century story. In virtually ignoring the subject of Jewishness for most of this long and detailed biography, Evans—himself an eminent historian of Nazi Germany—is being faithful to Hobsbawm’s own self-understanding. Jewishness did not interest him, and his life can be seen as a flight from it, in several senses. By citizenship he was British; his historical work focused on Britain, Europe, and the whole globe. By intellectual conviction he was a communist, which to him meant a universalist and a rationalist. While he of course never denied being Jewish, it seems he only avowed it in the context of criticizing Israeli policy or, oddly, explaining why he wrote so little about the Holocaust in his bestselling history of the 20th century, *The Age of Extremes*: “there can be no doubt what a Jewish historian feels about the Nazi genocide.”

Yet the trajectory of Hobsbawm’s life, and much of his intellectual sensibility, only makes sense in the context of 20th-century Jewish history. Certainly his life was shaped by the cosmopolitanism of Jewish Europe. Hobsbawm was born a British citizen, because his father had been one: The family, originally named Obstbaum, had emigrated to London from Poland in the 1870s. But his mother was Viennese, and his parents met in Alexandria, Egypt, just before World War I, when she was there as a tourist and he was working for the colonial postal service. Trapped in Egypt during the war—Eric was born in Alexandria in 1917—they decided when peace came to live in Vienna rather than London. This proved to be a disastrous choice: Beset by poverty and illness, both of Eric’s parents would die before he reached the age of 14, leaving him and his sister to be raised by relatives in Berlin.

Arriving in Berlin as a Jewish teenager in 1931, at the height of the crisis that would bring down the Weimar Republic, was decisive for Hobsbawm’s political evolution. Capitalism had been discredited by the Great Depression and Nazi stormtroopers were marching with impunity in the streets; only the Communist Party, it seemed, had the strength to fight back and achieve a better future. For a lonely, uprooted orphan, the party promised comradeship; for a Jew, it promised a future free from anti-Semitism; for a boy who had known destitution firsthand, it promised a society free from want. No wonder Hobsbawm began to entertain romantic fantasies about the Soviet Union and the glorious communist future.

But in 1933, just weeks after Hitler took power, Hobsbawm’s life took another sharp turn, when his aunt and uncle decided to flee Germany for Britain, where they still had citizenship. Oddly, Evans seems to endorse Hobsbawm’s own view that this move did not place him in the category of Jewish refugees from Nazism: “Eric was not a political or any other kind of exile,” Evans writes, echoing Hobsbawm, who said,

“I came not as a refugee or emigrant, but as someone who belonged here.” That Hobsbawm would want to believe this makes sense—it is more comfortable to be a returning Briton than a stateless Jew—but it is obviously untrue; a Jewish family fleeing Germany just after the Nazis came to power was quite clearly motivated by fear of persecution, in the Hobsbawms’ case as in thousands of others. Certainly, had the family not fled when it did, Hobsbawm would likely have ended up a teenage victim of the Holocaust.

Young communists were everywhere in Berlin, but in Britain, Hobsbawm discovered a very different political climate. Not only was there no mass communist movement, but as Evans shows, the small Communist Party of Great Britain was a workers’ party, hostile to the middle-class intellectuals who flocked to the party in other European countries. This changed somewhat when Hobsbawm went to Cambridge in the mid-1930s, at the height of the Popular Front. Indeed, Evans writes, “Cambridge student Communism subsequently became notorious as a nursery for Soviet agents,” such as the spies Kim Philby and Anthony Blunt, who graduated shortly before Hobsbawm arrived.

But already at Cambridge, the split or paradox that would define Hobsbawm’s adult life showed itself. Ideologically, he was committed to overthrowing the established order; but in real life, he was highly adept at joining it. As a student, he received a top degree and was recruited to join the elite Apostles club. Late in life, he turned down a knighthood on the grounds of his republican principles, but accepted the Companion of Honor award, granted by the Crown to a small number of eminent artists and humanists. Evans quotes one colleague who observed that Hobsbawm had “always been an institutions man.”

Evans shows that Hobsbawm’s career was slowed, if never halted, by his communist views. During WWII, he was conscripted into the army but remained under official surveillance. In the army, Hobsbawm was denied promotions and overseas assignments for security reasons, though he was never told the truth about why. After the war, he was able to get a job at Birkbeck College, a London-based college for adult students where he remained for his entire career; but he was blackballed from Oxford and Cambridge, where a historian of his gifts might well have expected a chair. His BBC radio talks were carefully vetted, though he continued to record them.

Evans implies that these obstacles in Hobsbawm’s path were petty and unjust. But it is hard to fault the representatives of Britain’s liberal order for being hesitant to embrace someone openly dedicated to its overthrow. It is true that, compared to actual Soviet spies like Philby, who were entrusted with important positions in British intelligence, Hobsbawm had little power to harm his country. But a popular and influential historian wields another kind of influence, and it is worth asking to what extent Hobsbawm used his writing to promote a political vision that was responsible, during his lifetime, for at least as much oppression and death as fascism.

‘There can be no doubt what a Jewish historian feels about the Nazi genocide.’

Evans’ view is that Hobsbawm was a historian first and a communist second. He did not take his allegiance to the party to the extent of lying, distorting evidence or using his professional work for propaganda, the way many communists in other fields certainly did. Indeed, Evans makes good use of the transcripts of MI5’s wiretaps of CPGB’s London headquarters, which reveal that the party bosses saw

Hobsbawm as more of a problem than an asset; for instance, he stubbornly refused to follow the party line on Hungary in 1956. Hobsbawm himself acknowledged that as a communist “you were supposed to write a straightforward line, and whatever I said did not fit in.” He noted that “not a single one of my books was ever published in Russia in the Soviet period”: His defenses of **bandits** as freedom fighters hardly matched the Soviet vision of total state control.

At the same time, Evans tends to discount—precisely because it is so obvious—the way that Hobsbawm’s communism informed his vision of modern history, particularly in his bestselling *Age* series. For Hobsbawm, capitalism was the great evil and disaster of the modern world, and communism a noble and necessary, if sometimes misguided, attempt to cure it. No amount of communist atrocity could change this equation. Late in life, Hobsbawm was interviewed by the Canadian intellectual Michael Ignatieff, who asked him whether “the loss of fifteen, twenty million people” would have been justified if the Soviet Union had succeeded in creating a world revolution; he unhesitatingly answered “Yes.” Unlike the repentant ex-communists he despised, Hobsbawm never gave up the barbaric doctrine that the end justifies the means.

This core conviction of the essential goodness of communism colors Hobsbawm’s interpretation of key moments in modern history, particularly when the Soviet Union is involved. When he comes to write about the Russian Revolution in *The Age of Extremes*, for instance, Hobsbawm romantically praises communist revolutionaries, who were responsible for untold amounts of suffering and death, as “the necessarily ruthless and disciplined army of human emancipation.” He chastises England and France for appeasing Hitler at Munich, but barely mentions Stalin’s alliance with Hitler to divide Poland between them. And he blames the origin of the Cold War, not on Stalin’s actual aggression in Eastern Europe, but on a putative American attempt to “turn an exhausted and impoverished U.S.S.R. into yet another client region of the U.S. economy.” Hobsbawm’s history may be legitimate left-wing interpretation rather than culpable communist propaganda, but clearly the line is a thin one.

Of course, there was more to Hobsbawm’s life than politics, and even more than writing history. Evans documents his turbulent first marriage to a party comrade, which ended in misery, and his happy second marriage to a woman who was less interested in the cause. In between came a footloose period in which Hobsbawm followed his love of jazz through the clubs of London, including some seedy places where he befriended prostitutes and drug addicts. And of course, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* meticulously tracks his many publications, reviews, awards, and occasional feuds and controversies—the usual milestones in the life of an academic historian. But a life “in history” as a profession is seldom very dramatic. What makes Evans’ book worth reading is his account of a life in the crucible of the 20th century, from which Hobsbawm emerged physically, if not intellectually, unscathed.

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Adam Kirsch is a poet and literary critic, whose books include [The People and the Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature](#).



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